

Transcription: Jim Brown

Today is Monday, November 21, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and this morning I'm going to be interviewing Mr. Jim Brown. This interview is taking place in person at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas. It is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to actually drive down here and sit down and do an interview.

Jim Brown: Good to be here.

It's an honor for us. First question, sir, I always ask with these interviews is please just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Jim Brown: Okay. I was born in 1946 in San Saba, Texas. I'm a true Texan and have lived in Llano and moved to Austin in 1957. Got a twin brother, happily married. Folks have passed on now. Went to Southwest Texas State University and graduated in 1968 and got drafted in November of '68.

You were in college at the time you were drafted?

Jim Brown: No. I had graduated.

You'd graduated. I guess a lot of people know about that time being the time draft dodging was going on and war protests and that sort of thing. You always hear or read the stories of college students staying in so they'd have their deferment. Once you graduated then, that deferment was gone. Is that right?

Jim Brown: Well, right, but also my dad had served in World War II, my twin brother had been drafted, and joined another year. So I knew I wanted to serve. I knew I didn't want to do monthly drills and a six-year commitment. I wanted to go in and, funny now, I thought I would be a clerk because I had a BBA degree and typed 30 words a minute. That changed real quick when I got advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California.

You wanted to go in but you actually got drafted?

Jim Brown: Yes, yes. I didn't join.

So you got a draft notice in the mail?

Jim Brown: '68 was a big draft year.

Did it tell you you had to report to a certain place for an inspection, a physical?

Jim Brown: San Antonio. I did a pre-induction physical in San Antonio. Then I got my notice back in November.

In November. So from when you actually got the notice, how long did you have before you actually had to go to basic training?

Jim Brown: It was pretty quick. I think a couple months. Yeah.

Couple months.

Jim Brown: I don't remember the exact date but I was prepared to go after I got my degree. Had a part-time job.

You said your twin brother had already joined the service.

Jim Brown: No, he had gotten drafted and joined another year. For extra training. So he spent a year in the States, a year in Germany, and a year in Vietnam, working on helicopters.

Okay. Did you know anybody at that point who had been in Vietnam or was in Vietnam?

Jim Brown: One guy from our high school class, Johnny Burkhardt, who served in Vietnam. He's the only one I knew. Not many people from my high school class actually went. It's amazing how few veterans there are in the class of '64 from Travis High School.

What was it like on campus at Southwest Texas because you hear stories of the protests and the hippie movement and that sort of thing. Was there much of that in San Marcos?

Jim Brown: I was a commuter so I didn't stay on campus. I saw a few little things like that but very laid-back college. Not much in the political scene back then. And then Lyndon Johnson was a graduate of Southwest Texas.

And that was right around the time that he had decided not to run for reelection. So you had Richard Nixon had won. But '68 was definitely a, you had to have known what you were getting into.

Jim Brown: Yes. I would watch the news every night and it was very graphic. But I really didn't see myself in combat. I saw myself serving as a clerk with the BBA degree. But it was very graphic, you're right.

So you get drafted, you report a couple months later. Where's the first place they sent you?

Jim Brown: Let me back up. I got married November 9th and got drafted November 19th.

Wow.

Jim Brown: And my preacher said, "I'll get you a deferment." I said, "No sir, I want to go in and get it over with 'cause I'm going to be a clerk." We laugh in the family, we laugh about that.

So you had been married for 10 days when you got your draft notice.

Jim Brown: Correct.

How did you wife feel about that?

Jim Brown: A lot of emotion, a lot of emotion. And before I went to Vietnam a year later, she was pregnant with my first child, who's now 41 years old.

Wow. So, where did you get sent to first?

Jim Brown: Basic at El Paso, Fort Bliss. Cold November. First job I had was washing pots and pans outside in the cold snow. Basic is 12 weeks? Eight weeks? So, good times.

What were most of the recruits like that you were with? Could you tell who was drafted and who was there because they wanted to be there?

Jim Brown: If you looked at the serial number, I think RA meant that you joined up for a normal . . . A whole mix from high school to college to dropouts, long hair, short hair, every ethnic group, a varied mix of Hispanic and Black and what not.

How did everyone seem to get along where you were?

Jim Brown: I felt like we got along great. We're all in the same boat together. Whatever you're doing, you're doing it together. I saw no racial problems at all or no animosity.

Not like I see in the Hollywood stories.

Jim Brown: Correct, correct. We all pulled together.

So you're there in Fort Bliss, and you're doing your basic training, and you at that point think you're going to be a clerk?

Jim Brown: I'd taken all the tests, had a college education, typed 30 words a minute, and I figured I'm clerk material. So we got notice right after Christmas. We got Christmas leave, and sometime right after Christmas, on the bulletin board, which we're supposed to read twice a day: "The following personnel will take M16 training." I went, "Wait a minute. This is not looking too good. I'm a clerk typist. I don't need to use an M16." So when I first feel like something's going to happen. And then later, I got orders for Fort Ord, California, for advanced infantry training.

Being a college graduate, that had to have been pretty rare in your platoon, right?

Jim Brown: Yes. There was only a few of us.

Was there ever any talk of trying to send you to Officer Candidate School?

Jim Brown: Nope. None at all.

I'm surprised by that. I would've thought that they would see you're a college grad, let's send him.

Jim Brown: Well I did get picked later for NCO school.

Later on.

Jim Brown: Yeah. Yeah.

So at some point the decision has been made by somebody, you don't know who, to make you an infantry man?

Jim Brown: Correct.

So what happens at that point?

Jim Brown: I got Christmas leave and got orders for Fort Ord, California. Wet, cold, great Vietnam weather, the wet part. For, I guess that's 10 weeks or eight weeks, I don't remember. The old War War II barracks, a lot of running, a lot of marching, all the weapons systems. And then just towards the end of my cycle, I got picked for NCO school. And I don't know the exact date, but all I knew, when I'd call my wife and say, "It's looking better, NCO school's 12 weeks." And the rumors back then was that the war's going to end. That was always on people's, like, "Oh, it's going to end, it's going to end." Which didn't happen of course.

Where was your wife at this point?

Jim Brown: Here in Texas. Here in Austin. She was living with her parents. Had a full-time job so she had protection and a family support system.

So they select you for NCO school which is, I guess, an honor and based in large part because of your college graduation.

Jim Brown: There's four of us from AIT that went to NCO school. One gentleman dropped out and the rest of us graduated as a sergeant E-5.

Wow. So that's quite an honor because you're going from basically buck private to sergeant right away.

Jim Brown: Correct.

Did you feel like that was a lot of responsibility all of sudden?

Jim Brown: I didn't feel the responsibility. I was honored to have the rank and a little more pay, but I'm a pretty laid-back kind of guy, you know. And I was one of the few that was actually married at that part of our career.

So you finish your NCO course, you're a newly minted sergeant.

Jim Brown: Sergeant E-5.

What happens at that point?

Jim Brown: I got assigned to Fort Hood. I was an 11F40, 11 Foxtrot 40, which is operations and intelligence. Up at Fort Hood, they, no one knew what it was, so they put me in a radar unit, and we ran radar sitting on top of buildings looking for people stealing cars. Had some field duty but really laid back. Plus, I got to live off base, had my wife, my trailer, so I had like a normal job.

So this takes us up to sometime in '69?

Jim Brown: Correct. Yeah.

When is it that you go to Vietnam?

Jim Brown: Several weeks pass and life is good. I'm living in my trailer, had my wife, life is good, and my first sergeant said, "Let me get the orders for the day and I'll be right back." I was

in my car getting ready to go get coffee. He came out, and James, his face was about a mile long. I said, "What's wrong Sarge?" He says, "I got orders for you for Vietnam." I went, "No, I thought they'd forgot about me." Literally, I thought the Army had forgot about me. I said, "May I have the day off?" He said, "Yeah, take off." I went to my trailer and we cried all day long. It was like, "Oh no." So, we got everything ready for me when I was going to ship out.

When is this?

Jim Brown: This is about a year later.

So it's November of 1969.

Jim Brown: Yeah. So I got to Vietnam Thanksgiving Day '69.

Things had not gotten much better there.

Jim Brown: No. The good news and also the family was my wife was pregnant. I found out the week before I went to Vietnam. So it's like, wow, I'm glad we had the child. Sometimes I wished I had waited, but anyway, she was pregnant the whole time I was gone.

Wow. And so, how long was it when you got the orders from your first sergeant, before you were gone?

Jim Brown: I got my 30-day leave and then I shipped out and got up to, the base in Washington. Tacoma.

Tacoma. McCord Air Force Base?

Jim Brown: McCord, that's where we shipped out from. Yeah.

In Vietnam, they sent everyone over individually, right? You didn't go with anyone else from your unit?

Jim Brown: No. I met one guy that had been in NCO school with me. The only people I knew on the entire Flying Tigers Airline, Phillip Green _ . I knew only this one person.

Were they sending you over there to perform your job as a kind of intel specialist?

Jim Brown: I had no idea what I was going to do. Knowing it was Vietnam, I flew into to Cam Rahm Bay about two o'clock in the morning. Had a stopover in Japan for a couple of hours.

What was your first impression of Vietnam?

Jim Brown: It was hot and it was all green-skinned people. Just like a madhouse of people, everywhere. Not the barracks but where we landed. It's like, "Wow, this is a different world over here." I didn't know anyone. Just the buddy I went with.

So you get off the plane, it's all this stuff, people moving around . . .

Jim Brown: Move, move, move.

You know you're in Vietnam, you know, you've seen the news, you've read the stories, the horrible picture that's been painted for folks back home. What are thinking at that point? What's your mindset?

Jim Brown: Just confusion. Go here, go there, this test, that test, this shot, they put some red stuff on our teeth, I guess looking for cavities, had to brush our teeth. Just unusual. Not knowing anyone except the one guy I went with. Who's since passed away, unfortunately. Had a brain tumor so I've lost a good friend.

Once you get there, are you kind of in a holding pattern until they pick a unit for you?

Jim Brown: Holding pattern. Kind of a, I forget the training, but booby traps, and I was in charge of a squad of the recruits, to take them around the different areas. The mess hall and we had some old barracks we stayed in. And right on the ocean the wind was blowing so it was like, okay, this is just me. I mean I felt really alone.

Were you able to contact your wife?

Jim Brown: No. No contact at all.

Just mail, I guess?

Jim Brown: It took a long time to get some of the mail.

I would guess a couple of weeks?

Jim Brown: Remember there was a mail strike later when I was up at my unit. 'Cause I got more mail than anyone else. My mother was a first grade teacher and she had her kids send me letters and cartoons and it was real sad to me to see how many guys did not get mail.

Sure. That's a big morale boost.

Jim Brown: It's like a huge boost. That's right. And the sad part of my story is they didn't send that stuff back from Vietnam. That would've been some classic, classic material to now meet the people who are now grown, 40 years old. "Hey you sent me a letter in Vietnam, and thank you." And thank 'em personally.

That's right. What unit did they put you with?

Jim Brown: I was the 1st of 6th, 198th Recon, Americal Division. Had a little firebase called LZ Bayonet. When I got there, the recon squad was out in the field. So it's just me and my brand new boots and my clean uniform. They had me dig a fighting position, ride on a trash truck taking trash, without ammunition, an M16 and no ammunition. So I was really alone there, for three or four days until they came in.

Came in from the field.

Jim Brown: A big, big shock. Helicopters landed. They guys are getting off. They'd been out in the field like 20 days. Dirty, filthy, cussing. I went, "Oh my God. This is war. This is the real scene."

Yeah, you're in it now.

Jim Brown: But they welcomed me. I saw another shake and bake sergeant and we became good friends. Still friends to this day. I took a guy's place, after about a month, that was getting out. So I had a recon squad of my own. Really a platoon. A squad, only a platoon. We had very few men. I think our maximum strength in that unit was probably 25 guys actually in the field. But sometime it was low as 15 guys.

In your platoon? Fifteen to 25?

Jim Brown: Yeah. And I had a squad of six to eight.

Did you have a lieutenant that was the platoon commander?

Jim Brown: The lieutenant was a first lieutenant, West Point graduate. A super gentleman. He's an attorney in Birmingham, Alabama. A very strong leader.

When you got there, did he sit down and talk to you?

Jim Brown: He sat down with me and said, "Sergeant Brown, do you want to stay in recon or would you like to go a line company?" I said, "Sir, I don't know the difference." He said, "Why don't you try recon and if you don't like it, I'll put you in a line company." It was the best decision, one of the many good decisions I made because we had such discipline with that small a force. And truly, he's an attorney in Alabama, he comes to reunions, he's a true leader of men.

That's great.

Jim Brown: He stayed in as a career. I believe he retired as a colonel.

What were most of the other soldiers like that you served with? You mentioned that you had a lot of good discipline. Was it because of his leadership or was it because of the type of mission or was it a combination of those?

Jim Brown: I think a combination of all that plus being in recon, you have to have discipline and I can say truth is, every day you learn something new. As a sergeant I said, "Hey, I'll follow you guys. You tell me what do, until I learn." I was not a Fort Benning, knife in the teeth, "Follow me." I said, "Hey, let me be a . . ."

You were smart enough or wise enough to understand the danger.

Jim Brown: "Let me be a player." You bet. And they accepted me right off the bat, and it really is rewarding. Then I look back on that time. Because when you're green, I mean, what they teach you in school is totally different from what you learn in the field.

Sure. Tell us if you would, sir, a little bit about the first time you went out in the field with your fellow soldiers.

Jim Brown: Okay. Got on the helicopters, head out. Had my map. I was still learning how to read a map properly. Had no action. No fights, no bombs, no missiles. It was just walking through the jungle.

Were you given a mission, just go out and check out this area and come back?

Jim Brown: We'd go out and then we'd keep one squad back and the other squad would go out and do a clover leaf out and come back. We rotated our point man. Each squad, each team. So no one had to do point more than once. I never walked point.

Just a foot patrol through the jungle?

Jim Brown: Total foot. We did rice paddies, we did mountains, we did jungle. A beautiful country too. I'd like to add that. Just a beautiful country.

The first time you were on a patrol like that, what did you think? Were you guys completely focused on doing the mission or was there something in the back of your head that thought, "I'm actually here now, doing this for real."?

Jim Brown: All those thoughts passed through your mind. First of all beautiful, but it's also so dangerous, and you just don't know where it's going to come from. So I was constantly learning, as everyone did, 'cause they had more experience than I did. Looking around, looking down, looking up. Always, and the light and noise discipline so there wasn't any, what's the word? BS going on, you were concentrating on your mission.

Sure. Definitely different from some of the Hollywood stories you see of guys smoking and joking and playing the radios and doing . . .

Jim Brown: And being a small unit like we were, every once in a while we'd team up with some line companies, meaning 80 guys, and it was a stark difference between a recon and line companies with lack of discipline. All these men eating their C-ration on the trail, throwing the can down. Some people had transistor radios. Totally foreign to what I was trained and the unit I was with. I thank God every day for having Lieutenant Walsh, who was just a super, super leader.

How many of those patrols would you do? Would it be one a day or every couple of days?

Jim Brown: No. We'd do three-day missions, five-day missions. We'd come in back to our base camp at LZ Bayonet, maybe for a day or two. Hot chow, floor shows. I didn't drink so I didn't care about the beer rations of two beers a day. All I wanted to do was take a shower and write letters and get my letters. I was kind of a loner. There was three of us NCOs that had a little hooch. Enlisted guys, super people, but they liked the cards and the loud music and the gambling and some drinking.

Sure. Would you pretty much always go out in helicopters and come back in helicopters?

Jim Brown: Most of the time. Couple of times we went out in trucks, which was rare, on a pretty long mission that went to, I don't know how many miles from the base, but it was for about 30 minutes in a truck. _ I guess they had.

Tell us about the first time you were on a patrol that you made any sort of contact with the enemy.

Jim Brown: Okay. Our lieutenant had gotten a notice. His mom was sick and he had to go back home, so we had a first sergeant who did a great job. We were in an area called Dragon Valley. I'll remember that 'til I die. Been out three or four days, crossed an open rice paddy. I wasn't smart enough to know that after you pass, you set up some security and keep moving and see if anyone's following you. And we got set up in Dragon and eating our chow and like, all of sudden, a grenade went off towards the rear, where I was sitting. And all of a sudden, machine gun fire from the enemy. And absolutely nothing came near me or my part of the perimeter. It was just amazing. I could have just stood up and danced, watching those green tracers. The grenade hit one guy and he died later.

How many men were with you on that perimeter?

Jim Brown: It was our platoon. It was probably 20.

About 20?

Jim Brown: Yeah. And we always get in a circle, you know, perimeter. We did not go to the top of the hill, the military crest, I think they called it. Like I said, looking back, I'd be a better leader today than I was then, for sure.

When that happened, did you feel like your training just kicked in?

Jim Brown: It did. But the first sergeant, Johnson, got everyone under control, called in some airstrikes or some helicopter gunships. They broke contact with us, but as you know, everyone opens up. You get in the perimeter and you throw all the lead out you can. The grenades, the grenade launcher. No airstrikes, of course, but the helicopters did some gunship runs where they thought the enemy might be. But they disappeared in the jungle. They're gone.

So when contact was made, you get in the 360 perimeter, and then . . .

Jim Brown: Yeah, we're already in the perimeter, right.

You guys just start firing even when you don't . . .

Jim Brown: You don't say anything, you just fire.

You just fire, wow.

Jim Brown: Yeah. It's like what's called a mad minute. It's more than a minute. But I look back, it's probably the firefights, the action, probably didn't last more than 10 minutes. And then you gather your wits and they call . . . well, we couldn't take the gentleman who died. He lived for quite a long time but the medic couldn't do anything with him. He had some lung damage and his lungs were filling with fluid.

How did you and your fellow soldiers handle that? I mean, the first time you . . .

Jim Brown: The other soldiers had been, had seen contact before. That was my first, and I can say, James, honestly it was like, "Thank God it wasn't me." I felt very selfish, like, nothing over here, no grenades, no bullets. I'm just sitting here enjoying chow if I wanted to, and it's just, it was so surreal, that it's all over there and not over here.

Yeah.

Jim Brown: Because they could've raked our perimeter with, if they had even got up but they didn't for some reason.

Sure, so you didn't feel, I guess, here's somebody that has been mortally wounded . . .

Jim Brown: That was a tough one, hearing him die where the medic couldn't do anything to help him. We had great medics and I got great care after I was wounded but that particular instance, there was nothing we could do. And the sad part also, he had less than a month to go in country. He was a cook who got permission to come out and go with recon just for the adventure of it, and it cost him his life. The good thing is I've stayed in touch with his, I didn't know his wife, but I ran an ad in the In Touch magazine, and did a donation to his name. So I've stayed in touch with his uncle up in New York.

That's great. So when that happens, you medevac him out I guess.

Jim Brown: Well, we had to take his body, I was in charge of taking his body down the hill down to a rice paddy where the helicopter could land. And then we had another team join us because we'd been . . . One guy was wounded and then one guy was killed, so a lot of emotion, a lot of "uh-oh," and so then they joined us and we continued our mission for another couple of days.

It seems like for you it wasn't a very traumatic thing. You dealt with it and you continued to move on.

Jim Brown: I did.

Did most of the soldiers in the unit do the same?

Jim Brown: Yes, 'cause most of them before I got there had already had two or three months, maybe six months in country and gone through this kind of thing before. So, there was a gentleman that was killed before I got there that I didn't know named . . . In fact, I checked in with the first sergeant to get my equipment and sign in and he said, "Sign your John Hancock." And I went, and he went, "Uh-oh." So somebody says, "We got a man killed named John Hancock."

Oh really?

Jim Brown: Like the week before. True story. And I said, "Okay." So it's like welcome to Vietnam, you know.

So you're there and you do these patrols, like you said, they'd helo you out, you would do about a three-day recon patrol or mission and come back. How long did you do that for?

Jim Brown: For the whole five months I was there. We had one R&R, not R&R, stand down they call it, where we all went over to the beach and had barbeque and beer and actually cots with sheets, that kind of thing. So it was kind of a . . . My whole life was focused on me and my wife and my baby. My wife was pregnant with my child. And I didn't drink beer. I'm still not a drinker. Didn't smoke cigarettes so it's like I'm not perfect but I had my own little world. It's so

different from the enlisted people that just wanna drink and have a good time. And I don't judge those guys. We're the best of friends now. But just a different mindset than what I had.

Sure. You always had to, obviously you missed your wife and you knew you had a child on the way, how did that affect you when you were out in the field? Did you have to compartmentalize it and somehow put that to where you didn't think about it?

Jim Brown: No, I did my job and I didn't think about not going there 'cause I might get killed. I mean, you're just so focused on getting whatever doing done. And there's so little action. You go weeks with nothing happening. In fact, I actually sat down one day and just went back through the missions and the personnel, and probably, James, actual combat time had to be less than an hour in five months. I mean, it's like, wow, but you never know when it's gonna happen, and that's the thing that keeps you on the fighting edge.

Sure. That's interesting, it really is. It's got to be tough.

Jim Brown: You see the movies. You hear the units that truly went through all kinds of stuff every day or every other day, and not to have that, I think it's a blessing I didn't have to face it but I would have been prepared to face it if it had. But having great leadership in our lieutenant was a phenomenal leader, and I want that stressed. 'Cause people laugh about officers and fragging and all that stuff that's happened later in our careers but you truly trusted him. And the first sergeant that took over when he was wounded. We did get a new second lieutenant later that we can talk about when the time comes up.

Yeah, that was one the questions I was going to ask. So the first lieutenant, he wasn't your CO the entire five months you were there?

Jim Brown: No, he actually had served his time. He was in the rear 'cause he was an officer and they have to spend so much time. Colonel Schwarzkopf was our brigade commander which was quite a thing. And our first lieutenant and him were good friends from West Point, so we figured we got volunteered for some missions. And then we had one session, a bitch session, where we were saying, "We're gettin' too many missions." And some of the talk was, "Well, lieutenant's trying to get points with the colonel." Probably not true but GIs like to bitch.

Did you get to see Schwarzkopf when you were there?

Jim Brown: I saw him but I never talked to him. I saw in the mess hall and walked past, and didn't know who he was but I know his name.

That's interesting.

Jim Brown: Yeah.

So when the Persian Gulf War became a big thing, did you immediately go, "I know who that guy is."

Jim Brown: I got all the articles, anything in the papers or the magazines.

He becomes a household name, somebody that you . . .

Jim Brown: In fact, we'd invite him to our reunions and he graciously sends back a nice letter saying, "Thanks but previous engagement prevents me from joining you all." But we still offer an invitation to him.

Wow, that's really neat. So, you said though that the lieutenant at some point was injured or wounded?

Jim Brown: No, he had to go back to see his mom.

Okay, he had to return?

Jim Brown: But she didn't die then but he went back to be with her. Then he rotated back to the rear. We got a new second lieutenant who it was just obvious even for me being the newcomer that he wasn't the leader the previous gentleman was. No judgment, just an observation that he didn't really know, he didn't instill the confidence that Lieutenant Walsh had so . . . And we swore at him but he . . .

Was he also a West Point grad?

Jim Brown: No, just a second lieutenant. I'm not sure where he graduated from.

So he was a brand new boot lieutenant?

Jim Brown: Brand new, yeah. And I knew a little, very little about him because he just shows up one day and we go on the missions but it was painfully obvious that he didn't have the confidence that we had experienced with the other lieutenant.

Sure. So what happens at that point then, when you and your fellow soldiers know that, you know, your platoon commander is brand new, doesn't have good command presence or perhaps, you know, judgment or wisdom or whatever in the field? Obviously you've got to follow his orders but you also don't want to put you and your men in a bad situation because of bad leadership. So what . . . ?

Jim Brown: Well, I was getting more aggressive and learning, and I didn't confront him, that's the wrong word to use but he was worried about Chieu Hoi leaflets. He was picking 'em up, and saying, "What's this?" "Don't worry about it. It's just a leaflet they drop on us." He didn't even know what that was. And all of the team, "Wait a minute. Let's keep moving. We don't need to be out here in the open looking at pieces of paper." Little things like that that come back to me now that, and I felt, I didn't feel sorry for him but I hurt for him as a leader. I want him to be like the last leader, and instill confidence in me as I was still learning every day, yeah.

Did the first sergeant kind of talk to him at some point?

Jim Brown: I think he did but I'm not sure. But the other three squad leaders like myself, E-5s, we talked in our way in our hootch about him but not judging, just hopefully we can help him.

Sure.

Jim Brown: And then he was wounded when I was wounded too which is later but . . .

Well, go ahead, I guess go ahead and tell us about that because I know that for a lot, especially the brand new lieutenants in Vietnam in combat situations, you read the stories and statistics about how so many of them were wounded or killed because they were . . .

Jim Brown: Quickly.

Because they were green but they were also the target.

Jim Brown: As anyone with a radio antenna or a sergeant, but lieutenant is the leader, gets targeted sooner.

Tell us then, sir, if you would about being wounded.

Jim Brown: Okay. We'd been in this one area for over 20 days, and we knew we hadn't seen any action. It was like, "What's gonna happen? We need to be out of here." And they sent us, I talked to the lieutenant and he said, "We have a mission." And I said, we're in a little firebase, I forget the name of it, been there relaxing. And we were running patrols. And I said, "We've been in this area now three days and this area, flat, near two villages, they know we're here." We did some missions out, talked to the villagers and the natives that were selling Cokes and porno and that kind of stuff. And it was just painfully open, no covers to begin with. But he said, "No sir, we have a mission." And so my squad had point and Sergeant Gray, who was back at school, had his squad had what we call drag. I got my squad up on this hill. It was totally dark, which is also a blessing in a lot of ways, and leaning back against my rucksack and just was going, "You know, this is war. I'm hot, I'm sweaty. I don't wanna be here."

Do you remember when this was?

Jim Brown: 31 March, 1970. I'll never forget it. And I'm back against my rucksack and just relaxing and hear the rest of the guys coming up, and making some noise too which was unusual. A lot of sand, right near the ocean. And, James, this is so true, I have to stress, this is no embellishment. My radar person said, "Sergeant Brown, Lieutenant __ wants to see you." I went, I won't use the language but, "What the hell does he want?" And another decision I made which I'm proud of, I said, "Radar, go see what he wants." And I stopped myself. Radar is my radar person. It's my job to go see what the lieutenant wants. James, I got up, still had all my equipment on and walked towards where I thought he was, and it's like the cartoons with the black cartoon of a voice says, "Psst, over here." And I turned and took three steps and the biggest explosion, a bright flash of light, and I'd stepped on a landmine.

Jeez.

Jim Brown: I didn't know what it was but the thought is, I wrote this down, "I've done something wrong." I didn't know what it was. I've done something wrong, in my mind. It hit 11 other guys but it was all in sand. They say it could have been a booby trap, _ , it could have been a big firecracker. I don't know but I went up in the air, they said, 20 feet, came to and I'd come in consciousness, out of consciousness, but I hurt everywhere. I have 11 holes in my body, a big chunk out of my rear end, both arms, both legs, some in the back of my head, outside my flak jacket right here, but I say quickly, I was blessed to be alive. And no one was killed. And it hit the lieutenant too so he was kind of out of it in his own way. The first sergeant again kind of took over and said, "Everyone, don't move. We could be on a mine field."

This is at night.

Jim Brown: This is totally, totally dark. No light at all. And so again, Sergeant Johnson said, “Everyone, don’t move.” One gentleman I’ve stayed in touch with came over to me and I didn’t know who he was, and said, “Oh, he’s hurt bad.” Which, you know, in first aid training, you always say, “Oh, you’re not hurt bad at all.” I said, “No, I’m not,” because I could breathe, I could cuss and I probably said the worst language that’s ever been. I don’t remember what I said but it was hurting, this was the part that was hurting. Everywhere was holes in my body but I could breathe.

What were you thinking, or do you remember what you were thinking?

Jim Brown: Well, like I said, “I’ve done something wrong.” And then I didn’t know if it was a mine or a bullet. I didn’t know but hearing the other guys scream and cry was like a surreal moment, you know.

Sure.

Jim Brown: Yeah, but I couldn’t scream and express my emotions of hurting so . . .

Did you think you were going to die?

Jim Brown: I did not. I did not. I know I went in and out of consciousness, and it took about, it seemed like a long time for the helicopter to get there. But everyone quiet, and they said, “They’re on their way.” And you could hear the blades and then they turned the light on at the very last second, and then sure enough. I don’t remember a stretcher. I do remember being thrown in the bottom of that helicopter, the bed of it.

Did they put the lieutenant in there with you too?

Jim Brown: No, no, no. He wasn’t bad enough. They all walked back. I was the one. One other gentleman had some pretty severe leg wounds, and he went with me. And then, James, I remember the medic slapping my arms, I guess, trying to find a vein. I don’t know what solution they put in me, and then the helicopter moving through the air and the blades making a whopping sound, and descending into Chu. And I guess the flight was, what, 15 minutes, I’m not sure what. But from that point, great medical care. ’Cause a lot of the guys whined and griped about the Army, griped about their service, griped about their food, whatever. I’m a pretty laid-back kind of guy, and I had everything to live for with my Christian family, my wife, my baby on the way, and without bragging, I’m real proud of how I reacted to it. But got great medical care. All the rumors about how bad the military service was. They changed my dressings twice a day which was very painful. They don’t sew you up, and they let all that infection get out. ’Cause plain white sheets at Chu Lai, and then from there to Cam Ranh Bay for one day there. A lot of the Navy personnel were some of the corpsmen, and the one guy, I can’t remember his name, says “How do you Army guys get rank so fast. I’ve been in the Navy six years, and you’re already a sergeant.” I remember that was right. Then from there to Japan, and I can’t, I think it’s the 249th General Hospital, I think, in Japan. Great nurses, clean sheets, and the ward full of all these wounded people. I feel selfish ’cause I don’t remember the people around me. But again, after about, I guess, a week, they did the surgery, sewed me up. And the doctor came in and said, great bedside manner, said, “I think you’ll be able to walk.” “Oh, thank you sir.” And that was the

bedside manner I got. But, from there, then to Brooke Army, and they took the stitches out after about a week down there, and then got another 30-day leave. Then, if I had been wounded a month later, the rumor was you'd be let out of the Army but I had to spend the rest of my time, do my two-year commitment up at Fort Hood playing Army.

When you were wounded, how long was it before your wife was able to get notification?

Jim Brown: Okay, I was in the hospital, the quonset hut, whatever it was in Chu Lai, and they tried to patch through a phone where the system was but it never went through. So I couldn't write because of the shrapnel. I'm left-handed but had shrapnel and had me bandaged up. So I asked a buddy of mine to write her. And if y'all remember back then, people were getting letters saying, "I'm glad your son was killed." "I'm glad he was wounded." Some fake letters, that kind of stuff. Well, my wife gets this letter but it wasn't my handwriting, and so she didn't know if it was true or not. It was kinda sad, so . . .

There was no official notification through the Army?

Jim Brown: None.

Wow.

Jim Brown: So she had to worry a little bit longer until I actually went from Japan to, we had a stopover in Alaska, refueling, then to a base right outside of Saint Louis. It's closed now, where they scheduled out the patients, and, you know, I knew I wanted to be in Austin or San Antonio, so, again, great care.

So that's when you were finally able to call her? Back in the States?

Jim Brown: Yes, yes, yes.

Tell us a little bit about, if you will, what you remember, what that phone call was like.

Jim Brown: Well, since she was pregnant and my dad was injured, not injured combat-wise, but in World War II, and he was very emotional about me even going, and my brother having been in Vietnam. But it was just like a big reunion so I said, "I'm being shipped out. I'll be sent to San Antonio Brooke Army." I forget the date, and when I got there the next day, my parents and my aunt, who had never had any children, and my dad all showed up. My wife who is . . . and I'm in the bed and my wife came in. Of course, she was six months pregnant.

Pretty far along.

Jim Brown: Yeah, and she gets on the bed and the nurse says, "Ma'am you can't do that." And then she said, "Well, I guess it's too late. It's okay now." And we, big tears and big hugs, and so she stayed, my wife stayed with my aunt and uncle in San Antonio, and she came to see me every day.

That's great.

Jim Brown: Yeah, and I did rehabilitation. I could walk but it took a while with crutches. And they took all the stitches out too. I had metal stitches. One of the stitches on my hip got infected

and they had to cut it open, and that was painful, and sew it back up. But, you know, all the infection was going on so . . . But I had nothing but the best things to say about the care I got.

That's great.

Jim Brown: And then a little aside, after I was able to walk, I was at payroll _ one day for the payroll, and had to go through the burn ward, and that is a shocking scene if you've not done it. What they call the crispy critters. It is really true. All they have is eyes and it takes a special doctor, a special nurse, to care for those patients.

Sure.

Jim Brown: So I got out, they put me, worked with a civilian in the ear, nose, and throat hospital, filing. I can't remember the lady's name, very sweet lady. And I'd go back. After leave I went back there, and then had a base housing for me. And one of those days I was working at the ear, nose and throat, and this file cabinet's kind of in front of the desk so I couldn't see me good, and this guy leans around the file cabinet and he says, "Brown?" I went, "Yeah." He says, "Richard Downs." Richard and I got drafted together, didn't know each other until we took oath in San Antonio. Richard and I are still friends after 42 years. He got shot through the neck and came out his shoulder and lived.

Geez. He was stationed there?

Jim Brown: He was there with ear, nose, and throat to check infections in his throat. And we have been . . . Now he lives in Falfurrias. He's a loner. He's got a bad case of post-traumatic stress but we'll call each other once or twice and say hi. He came up several times to stay with me for a day. I say a real healing for Richard and for me too. But no children, no wife. Just he lives in his parents' house in Falfurrias, little town in South Texas. So, that's . . .

Small world, small Army sometimes?

Jim Brown: It is true, true. And now in those reunions I started putting together, they didn't send my address book back but one guy knew one person, and so I did research with, I forget what the company was, found four of my guys, and they called them first and said, "Would you like to be contacted by a former member of your platoon?" We had two guys say no. "That's something in my past. I'm not interested in seeing those guys again." Which is disappointing.

It is.

Jim Brown: But now the ones that responded, we had our first reunion in Florida. James, talk about tears and hugs, it was just a great time, a great time.

That's great. Well, that's important, I think, especially because everything that I've read and from a lot of these interviews I've done, I know that Vietnam veterans weren't treated like they should have been treated. And so it's so important and great that you and your men from your unit are able to get together and . . .

Jim Brown: Plus in my case having a family, you know, I was able to just settle right back in to civilian life after being discharged. Got my first job, had no regrets, say wow. And I got a little disability check like, "Wow, this is pretty nice."

You had to have felt blessed too. Not many people step on a landmine and can say these things.

Jim Brown: Another story, yeah. Three weeks after I left, my machine gunner, Phil Brown, no kin to me. Phil was a 6'6", 200-pound farm boy from Illinois, stepped in an old fighting position, lost both his legs. And he's never . . . He's a Christian man, he's never, as far as I know, called God into account. He shows up. He could wear his false legs for a while but he's put on so much weight. He's 300 pounds without legs.

Oh no.

Jim Brown: But didn't get his manhood. He's got family. He's helped raise some of his stepchildren. Easygoing country boy. You can't ask for any better representation of our service, yeah.

When was the first reunion that you went to?

Jim Brown: In 1990, in Florida. Yeah, we just picked a date, a place, and another couple knew some people so . . . And we do it every two years someplace. We've been in Branson. We've been in Montana, Florida, San Antonio last year.

The men that were in your platoon?

Jim Brown: Yeah. Like I said, we had a small platoon, two squads, one platoon.

So just your platoon gets back together, that's great.

Jim Brown: I found some more, I was in our national reunion in Colorado Springs a couple months ago, and one of the gentleman there . . . I'm not a computer person but he did some research and found some guys.

Yeah, you can find a lot of people on there now.

Jim Brown: Yeah, I wrote them and have never heard back from 'em. I'll write 'em again for Christmas, and if that, I'll drop them off the call list.

Well, at least you're making an attempt to reach out to them.

Jim Brown: Yeah, I am. So, it's like I say, just to have a great leader like Lieutenant Walsh, discipline and no dope, it was just, I couldn't ask for a better Vietnam experience.

And when you get back home, your wife is six months pregnant so just about three months later you had a child.

Jim Brown: We had a trailer in Fort Hood, and so little Karen turned 41 last June.

Wow, that's great. That is a great story, sir.

Jim Brown: And it's all true. When I was in the hospital in San Antonio and it's like, the next bunk over some guy was telling the biggest war story. I knew him from basic training. I went, "Are you sure? That sounds awful embellished to me."

It's a good story. I know this program, that's what it's about is trying to capture these stories.

Jim Brown: And also I have great wife now. Of course I'm divorced from the wife, I mean, the mother of my children, but I can say to the man, if someone needed help financially, we'd all pitch in. We're that close, even though we don't see each other but every two years.

Well, I'm sure it's a bond. You know, anybody that's been in a situation like that . . .

Jim Brown: Yeah, no rank. It's like, no rank. It's like man to man.

Sure. The common bond is great, that you were able to have that connection still from the service.

Jim Brown: Well, I do feel blessed to have that small unit that was like a family.

That's great. So, you get back to Texas . . . You said it was pretty easy transition for you then? Just right back into it?

Jim Brown: Yeah, rented my house, and I got my first job in February after getting out in November. Built a new house. My dad was semi carpenter. I bought a lot even before I went in the service.

Did you live in Austin?

Jim Brown: Manchaca area. So I went to Travis High School here. Southwest Texas is where I graduated from. So, it was just very seamless. I would say the first job was five-hundred dollars a month, and I got a twenty-five dollar award from VA for wounds received in Vietnam. I was like, "Twenty-five dollars on top of 500, hey, we're doing really good honey." And then, James, exactly one year later I got a letter saying to report to Temple or Waco for a physical. And I told my dad who was a World War II veteran, I said, "Dad, I walk. I got a little nerve damage on my leg." I said, "I'm gonna go up there and they're not gonna find anything wrong with me. They're gonna cut my disability." So I went in, another true story, and took pictures of all my scars, talking to a microphone describing all these things medically, and sat down, and the doctor said, "What do you think about that war, son?" I went, "Well, sir, I think we oughta bomb the hell out of 'em." And he went, "No sir, we shouldn't be over there." And he put his finger on my nose and he said, "We shouldn't be over there." I went . . .

That was the doctor?

Jim Brown: The doctor. VA doctor. And I said, "Well, sir, that's how I feel about it. I think we oughta win it." And he said, "We shouldn't be over there." So got my clothes back on, got my travel pay, six dollars or whatever it was back then. And Dad said, "How did it go, son?" I said, "Well, Dad, I think I stepped, I said the wrong thing to the wrong guy. I said 'I think we oughta kill 'em,' and he said we shouldn't be there." So, funny story though. Got home and about a month later, here came an award for a 60% disability based on his evaluation of my things so, over the years, now I got diabetes which is Vietnam related. I had quadruple bypass 13 years ago. And so now I'm 100%, rated 100%. So, again, I didn't ask for it. It's like it came and like, "Wow."

Pretty shocking that a VA doctor though would be that unprofessional with a wounded veteran.

Jim Brown: Yeah. That early, as the war was still going on in the '70s.

Did you ever report that guy?

Jim Brown: No, I just live and let live.

I certainly would have. That's not, I mean, his job was to evaluate you and nothing else.

Jim Brown: And not judge, yeah.

Not to be causing a fight or something.

Jim Brown: I'm sure he's passed on. And now, James, in retirement, I had a 30-year career in the savings and loan, title insurance business. Always had a job, always paid my bills, and now I volunteer at the VA. We have a coffee bar up there serving veterans.

Down here in . . .

Jim Brown: On Montopolis. And we do the one, I do the one in Cedar Park where my doctor is now. I live in Cedar Park.

Great.

Jim Brown: But it's real rewarding to see the veterans come in, and some of them have the attitude, you know, with the military and the VA system. They don't feel, some of them don't feel like they're being treated as good. But it's a great service and I have no complaints.

I know that they're building a bigger new one.

Jim Brown: Brand new one's going to be ready in a couple years. It's gonna be a two story with all the medicals. For some, they have to go to Temple now or Waco. It's all gonna be located locally.

Yeah, because that one, you go down there, and you can tell they need a bigger space.

Jim Brown: Absolutely.

It gets really crowded sometimes.

Jim Brown: There's a lot of turnover too. Nurses and doctors do their time and move on.

Well, sir, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office, we want to thank you for your service.

Jim Brown: Well, thank you for taking an interest in us veterans. Again, I want to say I'm blessed to be here and have all my parts.

Absolutely. You know here at the Land Office we have archives that go back to the Spanish Land Grants of the 1600s, 1700s. We have the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of the settlers who came to Texas, and we have the discharge or the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo that says he was discharged by reason of death. So we have all these things in the archives, and our goal is to add these

interviews to those archives so, just as people today go down there and review those documents that are 200-plus years old, they might listen to these interviews two or 300 years from now, and just get a feel or something that, you know, learn something from it. With that in mind, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview, either today or even long after you and I are both gone?

Jim Brown: I think what I would say is service is honorable if you treat it as an honorable service. If you play by the rules, and I play by the rules whether it be civilian life or the Army life. The people that get in trouble are the ones that don't play by the rules. It's pretty simple, yeah.

Well, sir, it's a great story. It's a fascinating story. I think it's definitely a story of you definitely being blessed.

Jim Brown: And continued to get blessings, you know, as I age. I plan to go to the social security office next week to apply for social security. Been putting that off, and I so . . . I catch myself, if I want to gripe about something, I just stop myself. There is no reason to gripe about this life we've got.

Lucky to be alive.

Jim Brown: Lucky to be alive, have all my parts. There's more that I could add to that but, life is good, really good.

That's great. Well, sir, again, thank you very much.

Jim Brown: Well, James, thank you. God bless you and your service, and keep up the good work.

Thank you.